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Addressing Pre-program Anxiety for Japanese Students Studying Abroad

Lesley D. Riley, Nick Shackleford

Abstract

This study evaluates the impact of an intensive pre-departure orientation program on the success of a short term Study Abroad program, English + Medicine, at a national university in Japan. The study primarily identifies areas of anxiety for study abroad participants and examines the extent to which the students use language learning strategies (LLS) to help overcome their anxieties both before and during the program. In addition, the study identifies key factors that help determine success of Study Abroad programs for both students and organizers.

1. Introduction

Each year an estimated 10,000 Japanese students participate in short-term English language Study Abroad programs which combine formal classroom learning of English and very often a placement in a homestay family. Useful pre-departure orientation provided by the Japanese institution and careful management by the host institution of both the formal learning environment and the homestay placement can make this a rewarding experience for Japanese students. The overseas English language classroom experiences, combined with quality homestay placement, can provide students with multiple opportunities to activate their language skills in both the classroom and in authentic English speaking environments. Many Japanese students, however, experience anxiety about the expectations of the classroom and homestay components of the Study Abroad program which may compromise their ability to take advantage of the opportunities for language activation provided in the overseas experience.

2. Literature Review

Anxiety about the Homestay Program

A previous study undertaken by Shackleford (2001) found that anxieties about entering a homestay family exist particularly around 1) cultural issues (e.g. giving gifts), 2) accent and vocabulary, and 3) finding topics and joining others in conversations and household rituals such as bathing, laundry, dishwashing roles, and appropriate bedtimes.

Anxiety about language learning

A number of studies address the fact that learners have differing classroom expectations and thus "...frequently experience 'language anxiety' a type of situation-specific anxiety associated with attempts to learn a second language and communicate in it" (Ellis, 1994. p.480). Ellis maintains that prior to learners focusing on any new

learning task, they need to feel stress-free and secure. In relation to this issue, a study by Allen and Herron (2003) indicates that language anxiety may be reduced by pre-study abroad intervention. One form of intervention is to attempt to make learners aware of language learning strategies (LLS) to use before, during and after travel abroad.

Rationale for LLS intervention to help reduce anxiety

Adams (2000) conducted a pre-post study using Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) which showed those students who increased their use of LLS also improved language proficiency. However, it is clear that most students don't increase their use of language LLS if left to their own devices, emphasizing the need for explicit instruction or awareness. Given the multiplicity of variables in study abroad, there are many parallel areas where there are often large gaps in student knowledge about what to do when they experience language problems and difficulties, in turn often leading to increased anxiety.

In research on maximising the effectiveness of Study Abroad programs, Cohen et al (2005) suggest that "...many study abroad students lack an understanding of language learning strategies and consequently do not usually have a strategic plan of action for enhancing their language learning ability while abroad" (pp.15-16). Cohen's work also includes a Students' Guide aimed at helping students make the most of their respective language learning situations during overseas study. The Guide contains sets of learning strategies that can be used as tools to assist negotiating environments as self-empowered learners.

A major study by Ife (2000) looked at LLS use by study abroad learners. He concluded university students didn't make the most use of their environment and were not proactive enough. In advocating the use of LLS for learners, he designed a 'Travel Activity Pack' which included LLS from Oxford (1990).

3. Research Questions

1. To what extent are learners enabled to overcome their anxiety through participation in pre-departure orientation sessions?
2. To what extent can LLS awareness and use help learners overcome their anxiety?
3. What are the key factors in a Study Abroad program that determine success for learners and program organizers?

4. Participants

The first cohort to participate in a study abroad program at Unitec New Zealand, Auckland, were 14 Japanese students (Female=12, Male=2) from the Faculties of Medicine, Nursing and Pharmacology at the University of Toyama, Japan. Their English level was broadly identified as Pre-Intermediate (12) and Intermediate (2). Only 2 students had previous study abroad experience. The 3-week homestay study abroad language program, English + Medicine, was tailored to meet the specific needs of these students and provided credit transfer to the respective programs at Toyama University.

5. Instruments

A pre-program questionnaire (See Appendix A) was used to help determine levels of anxiety around homestay and classroom study of English, and to investigate motivation and goal clarification as well as the students' level of preparedness prior to departure. A post-program questionnaire was used to compare anxiety levels on completion of the study abroad program and also to examine what language learning strategies were used during the program to reduce anxiety. Post study interviews were conducted in Japanese with returnees. Students were also given the option of keeping written diaries during the program. Two students did so and gave permission for the content to be collated.

6. The Pre-departure Orientation Program

A preliminary meeting conducted in Japanese provided administrative information about selected homestay families and a detailed course program in the host country. The following pre-departure orientation sessions were designed and delivered with the aim of addressing as many learner needs as possible. Three 2-hour meetings in workshop style were held over one week, concluding 7-10 days before departure and conducted in English only.

Workshop 1: Focus on "New Zealand"

The first orientation session was designed to familiarize students with information about the host country – New Zealand (NZ). Information collected from the Internet and travel brochures was used to develop activities in line with this aim. Importantly, the activities were also designed to incorporate an awareness of LLS and to make these salient to the learners. Paralleling this, a primary aim of all three orientation workshops was to elicit areas where students felt anxiety. Examples of activities for Workshop 1 are presented below:

- Fun Quiz on NZ aimed at motivating students' interest. LLS made salient were guessing and applying prior knowledge.
- Short lecture on NZ history plus interesting facts about NZ. Note taking was the primary LLS.
- Students examined brochures, maps, and posters and prepared written questions about topics about which they had concerns or a need for more factual information. LLS addressed were: formulating questions independently or by sharing knowledge with a partner or in small groups.
- Introduction to the Pre-Study Abroad Survey (See Appendix A). Students were asked to carefully evaluate themselves, predict needs and identify any emotional feelings linked to worry or anxiety. The survey was explained, begun in the classroom and students completed it overnight.

Workshop 2: Focus on "Homestay" and "The English Program"

The second orientation session included focused topics on Homestay and the English Program. Workshop activities also addressed areas of anxiety and were based on subsequent and immediate feedback gathered from the pre-departure survey issued in Session 1. Further activities were as follows:

- Pre-departure surveys were collected and checked for those areas of high anxiety that could be addressed immediately in the workshop session.
- Careful attention was given to an overview that Unitec New Zealand provided about Homestay, in English and Japanese. This included information on procedures and rules of the Homestay connected to food, laundry, bathroom use, using telephone, smoking, valuables etc.
- For preparation outside class time, students were encouraged to prepare a Homestay ‘Self-Introduction’ such as photos of self, family, friends, university life etc.
- A broad overview of the English language program was presented that provided students with knowledge about the language program’s classroom focus and other educational events, that they would do a Placement Test on arrival, and be integrated with students from other countries.
- Group work: students formulated more questions on both topics in preparation for Workshop 3.

Workshop 3: Focus on “Asking Questions”

Workshops 1 and 2 provided triggers for a question and information-seeking third Workshop Session which covered all topics and filled more detailed information gaps based on individual needs.

- Sessions 1 and 2 were reviewed and further visual material such as handouts and realia were provided. Students formed groups and used individual notes to formulate final questions. Examples of questions and concerns raised from Session 3 included the following topics – many of them were practical and interestingly, not connected to the language classroom: 1) money and practical issues - exchanging money, making international calls, 2) travel and communication -bus passes, schedules, 3) food - buying food, lunch costs, 4) weather -clothing, sunscreen, 5) cultural concerns and cultural differences, 6) shopping and sightseeing -shop hours, city guides.
- The benefits of diary writing. Finally, students were introduced to this optional task to consider doing during the study abroad experience which involved recording events, reflecting on new life experiences abroad, documenting personal memories and practicing language learning skills. Students were told that these could provide a chance to improve language learning skills and retain memories.

Finally, Session 3 included brief discussion about LLS aimed at reducing anxieties during the English Language Studies program. Those pre-departure LLSs already used and perceived as being useful by students were identified. The LLSs identified were: listening to English tapes; looking on the Internet about New Zealand; talking to English speakers and listening to English on TV and the radio.

7. Results

For the purposes of this paper, results focus on data from the pre-questionnaire (Part A, Homestay, and Part C, Studying English) and present brief summarized results from the post-questionnaire. Pre-questionnaire results indicated

anxieties prevailed primarily around unknowns of homestay and secondly around the English language program. Within the homestay environment, three main areas were revealed: 1) communicating with the host family, 2) cultural issues and 3) household routines.

Homestay Anxieties

Communication with the Host Family

Prior to departure, some anxiety was experienced by most students about communication with and understanding their host family, the New Zealand accent, thinking of topics of conversation, using the telephone; talking about their country; getting lost and talking about personal problems.

After the program, except for two students, most anxieties were reduced in all areas; in particular, most found it easier to understand the host family more than they had expected. Anxiety increased for two students when talking about personal problems.

Cultural issues

Before departure, high anxiety (80%) was shown around knowing the right thing to do culturally, for example, choosing and giving the right gifts. However, post program feedback showed a significant decrease in anxiety regarding cultural expectations and behavior.

Household routines

Encouragingly, pre-departure results showed low anxiety around change of food and expected bedtimes. However, there was some anxiety around different bath systems (33%) and coping with laundry (50%). Post-program results showed a decrease in anxiety for most household routines except for different bath systems (25% increase).

Overall, the majority of students clearly moved from experiencing some anxiety over their homestay experience pre-departure to reporting, on return to Japan, little or no anxiety during their stay. Factors influencing the success of the Homestay program were helped by the pre-departure orientations, immediate homestay orientation on arrival at the New Zealand institution and the quality and experience of the hosting families.

English Studies Anxieties

Pre-departure results showed high anxiety about being able to understand the New Zealand teacher and not understanding the language classroom content. Some anxiety was indicated around being in class with students from other countries. However, there was no anxiety about having too much homework.

For post-program results, only three students remained a little anxious about not understanding the teacher, and only one student remained a little anxious about not understanding the course content. There was no anxiety about being with non-Japanese students but two students became anxious about too much homework.

Overall, the majority of students clearly moved from experiencing some anxiety over their English language studies experience pre-departure to reporting, on return to Japan, little or no anxiety. Factors influencing the probable reasons for this shift are presented later in this paper.

How adequate was the preparation given in the orientation?

It is not easy to evaluate pre-departure orientations until students return home, nor may the orientations significantly reduce their anxiety. Nevertheless, the authors believe that pre-departure intervention and training is more likely to lead to more successful learner experiences. Of 10 responses in this post-trip written survey, 6 students felt that they had “some” or “enough” preparation in pre-departure orientations. On the other hand, 4 students felt preparation was “inadequate”. In particular, they felt there was not enough preparation for the language demands of the program especially in specialist Health Studies classes.

Language Learning Strategy Use: Post-trip Interviews

Students were asked: “What new strategies did you use to improve your English during the Study Abroad program?” Results showing success for those students prepared to be active both inside and outside the classroom are tabulated as follows:

In the classroom

Talking to classmates, not using dictionary in class, using context clues, checking with peers, listening for key words with fluent speakers, asking questions in class (One student reports: “In Japan, we are not able to ask. Japanese don’t ask such kind of things but here is abroad so every time I had a problem I raised my hand and I tried to ask anything.”), seeking help from teacher outside class time, making eye contact, getting information from non-verbal clues, using multiple sources of information to research class tasks, use of the Internet, use of the host family as a resource, collaborative work with classmates. Two examples from student diaries are presented below that show how students combined their use of LLS and made persistent efforts to be successful.

1) “Day 1 - I didn’t understand homework. I asked a classmate (non-Japanese) but he didn’t know. Then I went to the teacher’s office to find out the homework. I threw pride out the window! I went to the teacher’s office to ask questions many times. I used all ways. I recognize importance of trying to speak like English speakers, even if in error.”

2) “...When I attended the first class, and I said didn’t understand at all, Ms. Keiko said I should stay one week, then I would understand. But I thought I would not understand after 3 weeks, even if I tried as hard as possible, I could not understand, so I tried to be active, I should try to take information from any source...”

Outside the classroom

Strategies included: using English on the train, on the bus, and in shops, (varying degrees of success), watching and discussing TV with the host family, talking while doing household chores with the host family, talking, going to movies with friends from other countries.

In summary, those who presented with a limited range of language learning strategies during the post interviews also presented with high anxiety about language learning and communicating with the host family in the pre-departure survey. Students with a range of language learning strategies experienced less anxiety before and during the language study and homestay program.

Diaries

Two students completed diaries identifying various events and experiences that caused anxiety on arrival and during the program. Positive feedback was also sprinkled throughout the diaries.

Excerpts from student A's diary written from Day 1 to Day 21 included: 'In the first class I couldn't understand anything; I can understand the Health Studies lecturer. After 17 days in the program, he writes: "Lately I am beginning to understand what they are doing in class so it's getting a lot more fun. Still, English is very difficult for me; But classes become interesting; I'm not sure if my English has gotten better or not."

Student B started writing her diary before her trip to New Zealand. At that point she felt pressures of fitting in exams, juku (study after school hours), and a planned ski trip. On arrival, she noted placement test pressure and difficulties with what she termed "corrupt" English, referring to New Zealand accents. The "most shocking thing was my electronic dictionary battery is flat!" She also felt that other students performed better and quicker than her and during a collaborative essay writing task, she notes: 'no-one knew the correct grammar so we could not get approval from the teacher'. Also, she felt her personal organisation was sometimes poor because she got lost on campus and was late for class. However, she enjoyed the specialty practical health activities, sightseeing trips and homestay family relationships. Although recognizing she needed to work on vocabulary, after 17 days she writes: "I understood what was going on today!"

Thus, an interesting feature of diary data is that the two students independently felt a change for the better on Day 17. But just as the 'penny dropped', it was time to leave. This raises the issue of optimal or sufficient length of time of any study abroad program.

8. Key Factors determining success

For Learners

Pre-departure, students had many opportunities to voice concerns in orientation meetings and avenues to relay these concerns to relevant parties. On arrival, homestay orientation at the New Zealand institution provided information and security along with the quality and experience of the hosting families. An orientation to the academic program at the New Zealand institution, the quality and the New Zealand teacher language program, the professional expertise of teachers plus students' awareness and use of language learning strategies all contributed to adjustment to the language classroom and lowering anxiety. Outside the classroom, many students continued their use of language learning strategies.

For Administrators

By ensuring the quality and experience of the hosting homestay families, obtaining input and feedback from pre-departure orientations in Japan and providing homestay orientations on arrival at the New Zealand institution, administrators in both New Zealand and Japan contributed to the success of the study abroad program.

Time and timing were also important factors in both countries. In Japan, allowing adequate planning time for students to address all issues connected to pre-trip anxieties and problems was critical. Students have many tasks to complete and organize before leaving such as physics and chemistry tests, doing part-time jobs and arranging finance. In order to provide the necessary and relevant information, the timing of orientations was also important to allow a minimum of three pre-departure and on-arrival orientations.

Dissemination of knowledge and shared knowledge for all “stakeholders” was a very important factor. In all groups, knowing what is happening, is likely to happen, or what is expected can enhance communication between groups leading to a smoother-running, more finely tuned program for client satisfaction.

9. Conclusion

The results of triangulated data presented to date (pre-post survey, pre-departure orientations, Unitec arrival orientation, student diaries and post program interviews) suggest that by identifying learner anxieties prior to and during a program, such anxieties can be addressed, to some extent, by program administrators, teachers, and homestay coordinators in order to help learners reduce and overcome their anxiety.

Levels of anxiety interfere with learning. Although this study did not set out to focus primarily on LLS use, the data reveals a need to provide tools such as LLS to help learners learn. This paper suggests, as Cohen (2005) and other researchers do that without intervention to reduce anxiety, the success of study abroad programs will be unlikely to be optimized.

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Appendix A .

Pre-departure Survey

UNITEC, Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand: Pre-travel survey

Please circle your responses. Write comments in Japanese if it helps. Thank you. ☺

Family name _____ First name _____

1. What is your major (senmon) at Toyama University? _____
2. Do you think your English level is:
a) beginner b) high beginner d) low intermediate (chuu kurai) e) intermediate
f) high intermediate g) low advanced h) advanced
3. This 3-week study can transfer credits to Toyama University. This is:
a) very useful b) useful c) not important
4. What type of place to stay do you like to stay? (you can circle more than one)
a) hotel b) apartment c) home-stay d) student room on the university campus
e) other
5. Is this your first time to study English abroad? Yes (go to next section) No
If No, where else have you studied English abroad? _____
For how long? _____
6. When abroad, did you have a home-stay family? Yes No. If No, where did you stay? _____

A. HOMESTAY. How anxious are you about your home-stay experience?

Please write 1-4 next to each question.

1 = not at all anxious	2 = a little anxious	3 = anxious	4 = very anxious
(shimpai shite inai)	(sukoshi shimpai)	(shimpai)	(totemo shimpai)

I amabout:

1. communicating in English with my host family
2. not understanding what host family members say
3. not understanding the New Zealand accent
4. not knowing the right cultural thing to do in daily life (e.g. at the dinner table)
5. thinking of topics to talk about in conversation with the home-stay family
6. not being able to tell about my country
7. not liking the food
8. not having rice every day
9. talking about my personal problems
10. not knowing what to do or say if my host family has a problem

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11. using a telephone in English
12. not having another Japanese speaker in my home-stay
13. using a knife and fork and not chopsticks (hashi)
14. being expected to go to bed early (many NZ families go to bed early)
15. sleeping in a western-style bed
16. using a different bath system (for example, taking short showers)
17. doing laundry
18. having a health problem (getting sick)
19. not being able to smoke inside the house
20. getting lost or having difficulty finding my way to campus (maigo ni naru)
21. choosing the right thank you gift for my host family
22. missing family and friends in Japan (homesick)
23. I would like a home-stay:
a) all of the time b) most of the time c) some of the time d) none of the time
24. During home-stay, I would like: (you can circle more than one)
a) to have my own room
b) to share a room with a family member (home-stay son or daughter)
b) to share a room with another Japanese student (futari beya)
c) to share a room with a student from another country
d) to not share a room but have a student from another country in the same home-stay
25. Writing a letter of introduction to my home-stay family before I arrive would be:
a) very helpful b) helpful c) a little helpful d) not helpful
26. In Toyama University orientations, do you feel you:
a) had enough preparation b) had some preparation c) need more preparation

B. REASONS for STUDYING ENGLISH in New Zealand

Please say how important each question is.

1 = not important	2 = not so important	3 = important	4 = very important
(juuyoo dewanai)	(sukoshi yuuyoo)	(juuyoo)	(totemo juuyoo)

I want to go on this international exchange:

1. to improve my speaking in English
2. to improve my listening in English
3. to improve my reading in English
4. to improve my writing in English

5. to improve my grammar in English
6. to improve my vocabulary in English
7. to learn NZ English phrases
8. to learn idioms
9. to learn non-verbal (gesture) ways to communicate
10. to make friends with English speakers
11. to see movies in English with no Japanese sub-titles
12. to have fun
13. to do activities outside the classroom
14. to live in a foreign country
15. Other
16. How important is it to have a bi-lingual person available all of the time?
a) very important b) important c) not important

C. STUDYING ENGLISH: How anxious are you about studying English?

Please write 1-4 next to each question.

- 1 = not at all anxious 2 = a little anxious 3 = anxious 4 = very anxious
(shimpai shite inai) (sukoshi shimpai) (shimpai) (totemo shimpai)
1. not understanding the teacher
 2. not understanding the content (naiyoo) of the lesson
 3. being in a class with students from other countries
 4. having too much homework
 5. not having enough homework
 6. Other _____
 7. How interested are you in the main study topic “English + Medicine”? (circle one)
very interested interested a little interested not interested
 8. What did you do to prepare for your trip to New Zealand? (you can circle 1 or more)
a) read English newspapers b) read English magazines c) read an English book
d) listen to English tapes e) listen to English on TV or radio f) talk to English speakers
g) write notes about Japan in English h) go to an English movie i) look on the internet about NZ
j) nothing k) other _____

Suggestion: While you are in New Zealand, please try and write a diary (in Japanese is OK) describing:

- a) Your feelings while you are in home-stay and in an English classroom.
- b) What cultural differences you notice.
- c) Things that you learn about English.